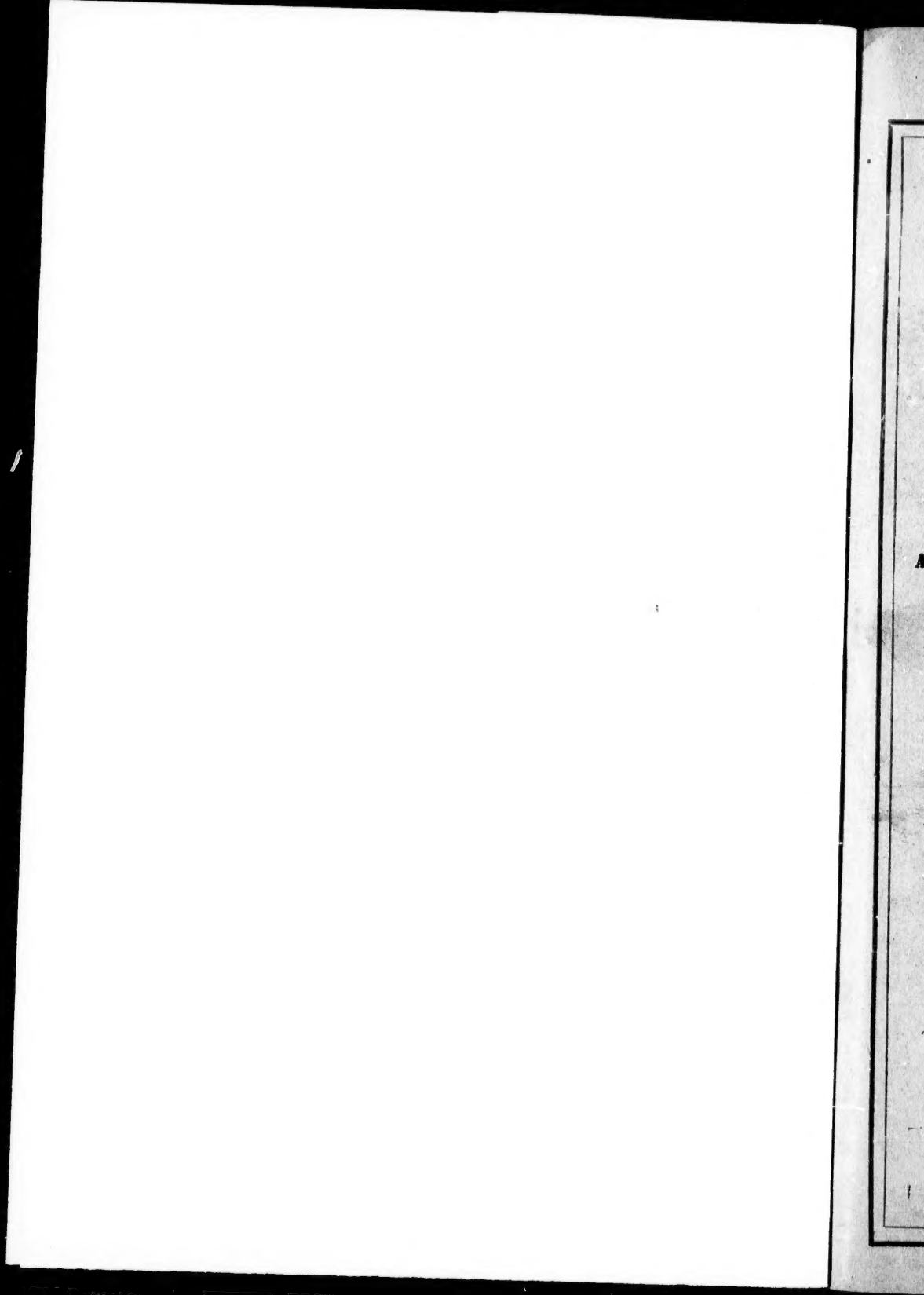




LECTURE

ON

ALCOTT,

BY

GEORGE STEWART, JR., ESQ.,

Author of "Canada under the Administration of the Earl
of Dufferin," etc.

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

LITERARY AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF QUEBEC,

29TH JANUARY, 1880.

[FIFTY COPIES.]

QUEBEC:

PRINTED AT THE "MORNING CHRONICLE" OFFICE.

1880.

LECTURE
ON
ALCOTT,

BY
GEORGE STEWART, JR., ESQ.,

Author of "Canada under the Administration of the Earl
of Dufferin," etc.

DELIVERED BEFORE THE
LITERARY AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF QUEBEC,
29TH JANUARY, 1880.

QUEBEC:
PRINTED AT THE "MORNING CHRONICLE" OFFICE.
1880.

I

4

M

y

tu

w

w

or

an

in

an

of

po

th

Co

lo

of

T

Co

St

th

lit

tic

ALCOTT, THE CONCORD MYSTIC.

READ BEFORE THE SOCIETY ON THURSDAY EVENING, 29TH
JANUARY, 1880,

BY

GEORGE STEWART, JR.,

*Author of "Canada under the Administration of the Earl
of Dufferin," etc.*

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

A year has elapsed since I had the honour of addressing you from this platform. On that occasion I took the opportunity of conveying to your notice a few imperfect thoughts which I had formed on the subject of Emerson and his writings, and the influence such a man must have, not only on the immediate community in which he may live, but among thoughtful people everywhere. To-night I purpose introducing, with your permission, a companion picture, and asking you to consider with me, the life and teachings of one who for more than half a century, has wielded a power—though in another way—scarcely less great than that of his friend and neighbour, Waldo Emerson himself. Concord, as many of you doubtless are aware, is one of the loveliest towns in New England. It is situated on the line of railway, and is scarcely an hour's ride from Boston. There are several Concords in the United States, but the Concord I mean, is the poetic and historic Concord of the State of Massachusetts—the Concord of Emerson, of Hawthorne, of Thoreau and of Alcott the mystic teacher, whose literary, and social, and educational career, it is my intention to enlarge upon to-night.

Next to reading the works of a favourite author, I think the desire is particularly strong within us all, to know something of the life and personal history of the man or woman who amuses us during the hours of our leisure. We like to know how Gibbon lived and worked, how Goldsmith wrote, of the long and entertaining walks which DeQuincey and bluff Kit North used to take together across the moors and fells of Scotland, of the regular habits of composition which Southey had, and of the struggles of the Grub street coterie. We love to read about the great breakfasts at the Banker poet's, and the grand old dinners at Holland House, about Macaulay's horror of cold boiled veal, of Johnson's copious potations from the steaming urn, of the one-dish dinners which poor Charles Lamb used to eat, and of Sydney Smith and his private beef-steak. What would we not give to hear Walter Scott recite, as he used to fifty years ago, one of his own ringing ballads, or a song of Burns', or the tender "Braes o' Balquhither" of the misfortunate Tannahill, or to hear Macaulay recite lines from the "Judicious Poet," or to hear the Ettrick Shepherd's lofty dissertation on the beauties of his own poetry, or to hear Tennyson read or rather drone "Locksley Hall." And we all like to know something about the houses in which these men of genius lived, and the little nooks and corners, which were at times their favourite haunts. We are interested in knowing who were the companions of Landor, and of Byron, and of the mystical Coleridge, and every glimpse which it may be our privilege to steal of their inner life, their personal and private life, interests us afresh, and sends us again to our libraries that we may read anew, with our added information, those splendid things of which we seem never to tire. And then when we are fortunate enough to know the primary cause of anything, the reason why such a thing came to be written, the origin of a poem, or of a story, or of a bit of essay-writing, how fresh and delightful and delicious the

new reading is ! We read with ten-fold pleasure Mr. Longfellow's "Skeleton in Armour," when we learn that it was while riding along the glorious beach at New Port, on a bright summer afternoon, that the subject of his poem appeared to him, clad in broken and corroded armour, and created so profound an impression on his mind that he could not rest until he put his thoughts to paper. And those tremendous lines on the "Wreck of the Hesperus," which all of you have read again and again, and which I used to read with an almost timid pleasure on stormy nights when the wind howled up the Bay of Fundy, and the vessels in the harbour rocked uneasily on their bed of white caps—those lines which tell of death and destruction, of the wreck and of the storm,—those lines so wild and grand. But how much wilder and grander do they seem when we know their history and the circumstances under which they were conceived. You who know the story, can you wonder at the frame of mind into which Longfellow was thrown, when the words of this ballad came wildly tearing into his head ? Can you realize the picture of the poet in his study sitting alone by the slowly dying fire,—sitting alone, smoking and thinking, and listening to the ticking of the "Old Clock on the Stairs," which seemed to croak the story of the great storm ? It was midnight, and the day after the gale. The wrecked Hesperus came sailing and plunging into his mind. Every passionate fancy of his brain fluttered and would not be stilled. There was no rest. He went to bed at last, but he could not sleep. He arose and during those few hours which come to us in the gray still morning, and which seem always the shortest, he wrote the burning words, not by single lines alone, but by whole stanzas. The clock struck three as the wearied minstrel concluded his labours. He had told his story :

Such was the wreck of the Hesperus,
In the midnight and the snow !
Christ save us all from a death like this,
On the reef of Norman's Woe !

And the ups and downs of authors are as interesting to us as many of the books they write. Their peculiarities and idiosyncrasies are generally entertaining, and assist us largely in the estimates which we often form of their character and relative place in literature. We need not go back to the days of Johnson, or of Pope, to learn about authors and their trials and vicissitudes. History repeats itself in matters relating to literature with the same unerring frequency as it does in political and social and military life. Hawthorne, you know, was so discouraged once because he could not find a publisher, that he burned the manuscript of his "Seven Tales" in his despair. Carlyle carried one of his most precious volumes—"Sartor Resartus"—from one publisher to another for months before he could find anyone courageous enough to undertake it. Walt Whitman's poetry fell dead from the press, and for years, "The Leaves of Grass" remained a housekeeper on the bookseller's shelves. Our own Heavysege worked for a decade and more on his really great poem—the masterly and Miltonic drama of "Saul," and though three editions of it were printed, the third involving in its revision, tremendous labour and anxiety, none of them paid the actual expenses of publication. The poet received nothing, and he toiled on to the day of his death, a man of all work, gathering news for an evening paper at one time, and setting type at another. It broke him down at last, and he died while in his prime. But I have said enough, I think. It is not my intention to-night to illustrate the struggles of authorship, or to ask you to penetrate the veil which hides so much privation and suffering from public gaze. I feel, however, it is only right that we should know something about the anxieties of mind, and the difficulties which our entertainers encounter now and then. We little know at what cost some of the most delicious morsels come to us. We seldom know of the sleepless nights which are spent in the elaboration of a story, or in the execution of a son-

net, which paints so delicately, perhaps, an ideal portrait, or incident. We read the fragment and throw it aside and think, may be, no more about it. We must be amused. We must be entertained. When our fool with his cap and bells grows sluggish, and ceases to tickle our fancy, we hurry him off the boards, and call for a new court jester to take his place in our revels, and the fun, fast and furious, goes on again. The public is an uneasy tyrant. He has no acute sympathies, and the literary cripple finds little favour in his eyes.

I have said that we like to know the private history of our literary friends, and though the subject of my remarks, this evening, is hardly popular enough for a general audience, yet I hope to interest you as much in the man as in what he has done for broad humanity and his own immediate circle. The name of Alcott, I am well aware, is not altogether unknown to you. There is hardly a young lady present, I am sure, who has not read with delight, the charming stories of home and village life which Louisa Alcott has written. "Little Men" and "Little Women"—two classics by the way—are books which appeal at once to a wide interest, and "The Rose in Bloom," "The Eight Cousins," and "Under the Lilacs," are hardly less elegant specimens of fireside reading. The best and sincerest critics,—our boys and girls,—have, long ago, ranked "Little Women" with "Robinson Crusoe," and "Little Men" as the only successful rival to the "Swiss Family Robinson," or the Adventures of those distinguished and delightful personages, Masters "Sandford and Merton." And you will respect, I know, the opinion of such sagacious judges.

Mr. Ruskin, the famous art critic and word painter, has told you in much better language than I can ever hope to use, that May Alcott's copies of Turner, are the only truthful ones he has ever seen, and that he considers Miss Alcott to be the only person living who has a right, by

virtue of her genius, to copy the enduring masterpieces of his idol. This is high praise. But Miss Alcott is no mere copyist of the works of others. Her own pencil is skilful and delicate. Some of you may have seen in the galleries, or you may possess in your own homes and have hanging on your walls, pictures which owe their life and tone and spirit to this lady's brush. Her panel pictures, her fruit and flower subjects exhibit best the poetic grace and artistic delicacy of her manner, a manner which is peculiarly her own and which individualizes all her work. You can tell one of her canvases as readily as you can determine a genuine Foster, or a Doré, or a Du Maurier, or a John Gilbert, or one of Tenniel's cartoons in *Punch*, for your really eminent artist has always some distinguishing feature, some revealing touch or mark which proclaims the authorship.* I know that most of you are familiar with

* I may say here, that the death of this estimable lady has just been announced. Two years ago she went abroad to perfect her art studies in Europe, and while there, she married Mr. Ernest Nieriker. She had been living in Paris up to the time of her death. These touching lines, entitled "Our Madonna," were written in her memory by her elder sister, Louisa.

A child, her wayward pencil drew
On margins of her book
Garlands of flowers, dancing elves,
Bird, butterfly and brook.
Lessons undone, and play forgot,
Seeking with hand and heart
The teacher whom she learned to love
Before she knew 'twas Art.

A maiden, full of lovely dreams,
Slender and fair and tall
As were the goddesses she traced
Upon her chamber wall.
Still labouring with brush and tool,
Still seeking everywhere
Ideal beauty, grace and strength.
In the "divine despair."

A woman, sailing forth alone,
Ambitious, brave, elate,
To mould life with a dauntless will,
To seek and conquer fate.
Rich colours on her palette glowed,
Patience bloomed into power;
Endeavour earned its just reward,
Art had its happy hour.

the name of Alcott for the reasons just mentioned. But perhaps the acquaintance which some of you may have with the family ends with the younger branches of the household. And on that account I have thought it better to say something at this time about Amos Bronson Alcott, the father of these clever Concord girls.

A wife, low sitting at his feet
To paint with tender skill
The hero of her early dreams,
Artist, but woman still.
Glad now to shut the world away,
Forgetting even Rome;
Content to be the household saint
Shrined in a peaceful home.

A mother, folding in her arms
The sweet, supreme success,
Giving a life to win a life,
Dying that she might bless.
Grateful for joy unspeakable,
In the brief, blissful past;
The picture of a baby face
Her loveliest and last.

Death, the stern sculptor, with a touch,
No earthly power can stay,
Changes to marble in an hour
The beautiful, pale clay,
But Love, the mighty master, comes,
Mixing his tints with tears,
Paints an immortal form to shine
Undimmed the coming years.

A fair Madonna, golden-haired,
Whose soft eyes seemed to brood
Upon the child whose little hand
Crowns her with motherhood.
Sainted by death yet bound to earth
By its most tender ties,
For life has yielded up to her
Its sacred mysteries.

So live, dear soul! serene and safe,
Throned as in Raphael's skies,
Type of the loves, the faith, the grief
Whose pathos never dies.
Divine or human, still the same
To touch and lift the heart;
Earth's sacrifice is Heaven's fame
And Nature truest Art.

A distinguished author once said to me that Mr. Alcott's books were mistakes. I turned the observation over in my mind and it started a new train of thought. Before this I had read "Tablets," but had not been very much impressed with it. When afterwards I learned that Mr. Alcott's books were mistakes, and serious ones at that, I made up my mind to secure the entire series—not a very formidable array of volumes—and vigorously began the whole course. I read very slowly at first in order to get at the style of the author, and to discover, if possible, what my friend had meant by mistakes. I may truthfully say that I was a little disappointed at the beginning. The books dealt largely in the ideal character, in the mystical, in transcendentalism, in spiritualistic thoughts, and in a certain peculiarity of expression or method that was not always clear, but quite profound enough in its way. As I read on I became more and more impressed with the idea that I was reading some very ancient but eminently respectable author, who was describing as something exceedingly new, several thoughts which had been very fully developed and explained two or three centuries ago. I was startled at the way in which Mr. Alcott grouped his favourites—Plato, whose writings he read, Mr. Emerson says, without surprise, Pythagoras, the high priest of our author's philosophy, and such moderns as Hawthorne, Carlyle, Emerson and Thoreau. You would fancy these gentlemen were contemporaries. All through the books there was something which reminded one of the Song of Solomon, of the Book of Proverbs, and of some things I had read once in a translation of the Talmud. Words of wisdom, quaint aphorisms, axioms, such as you would expect to find in Burton's "Anatomie of Melancholy," and books of that class and scope, crowded the pages at every turn, and as I got on with my task, I can assure you it did not appear as if my time was being unprofitably spent. Apart from the style, which does not flow easily, but is at times

atrociously turgid, the books possessed a true ring and a genuine flavour. They interested me very much, and I began to wonder at what I had been told. The next time I met my friend I asked him why Alcott's writings were looked upon by some persons as mistakes. "Oh," said he, "Alcott shouldn't write. His forte is to talk." It then began to dawn upon me that Mr. Alcott was a conversationalist, and that his books were composed of scraps of talk, bits of intellectual gossip from his easy chair and detached sentences from his drawing-room conversations. I became at once deeply interested in the man. I had read his works, I wanted to know more about his personality and his mode of life. I am afraid I felt very much like the two young damsels, Thackeray tells of, who having paid their shilling to see the Zoological Exhibition, and being unable to get past the pushing multitude, were about giving up in despair the idea of seeing anything for their money, when a man near them pointed out Lord Macaulay who was standing in the crowd, whereupon one of them exclaimed in a loud voice, is that Mr. Macaulay? Never mind the hippopotamus. Let us see *him*.

Mr. Alcott is four years the senior of his friend and near neighbour, Emerson. He was born at Walcott, Connecticut, on the 27th November, 1799, and like the poet-essayist at an early period in his life, he studied philosophical subjects and leaned towards Transcendentalism—that intellectual episode, as some one has not inaptly termed it. Indeed he was one of the great prophets and heads of the faith in New England, and though he never belonged to the Brook-farm Association, he linked his fortunes with a similar undertaking on a farm at Harvard, to which he gave the name of Fruitlands. This project embraced among other things, the planting of a Family order whose great aim was to afford a means of enjoying a quiet, pastoral life—a sort of bucolic and ideal existence which the devoted people who comprised the little community had framed in their

minds and carried in their hearts. It was a dream, a romance, a transcendental figure. Its chief tenets were good and noble for they comprised love of true holiness, love of all humanity, love of nature, love of all heroic things and aspirations. To carry out the principles of this hopeful organization was no easy task. It required self denial and faith, and an endurance which was more than human. An estate of some hundred acres was secured. The spot was chosen for its picturesque beauty and pastoral simplicity. The long lines of beautiful and purple-tinted hills, the pretty streamlets that flowed gently through the farm lands, the groves of nut, maple and towering pine trees, and the mossy dells and velvet dales near by, all contributed in their way towards the formation of an Eden which seemed to promise so much at first. Here the experiment was tried. Ten individuals, of whom five were children, formed the little circle. Work was begun immediately and a conscientious effort appears to have been made to bring the idea to a successful issue. A library containing the records of piety and wisdom was an early feature, and to it the members repaired in their hours of relaxation. The plan provided also for the culture and mental improvement of the inmates. The prosecution of manual labour was of course one of the primary objects, for Mr. Alcott had implicit faith in the co-operation of the head and hands. Every member worked with the utmost diligence and spirit. There was no shirking of duties. The inhabitants belonged to one family. All work for all. Love for one another was the fundamental law which was respected and recognized and believed in. The project failed, however, and Fruitlands is only remembered now as a chimerical experiment. It was never as important as the Brook farm episode, or as lusty as Adin Ballou's Solution of the culture and labour problem at Milford, but the founder never lost faith in the ultimate success of his bantling. He only thought when the fancy picture which his imagination conjured up had disappeared,

that the members were not prepared to actualize practically the life he had planned. He only postponed the fulfilment of his spectacular dream to a more propitious season.

As early as 1835 Mr. Alcott adopted the tenets of Pythagoras and the Italic school of philosophy, and accepting their dietetic peculiarities, he became a strict vegetarian. He observed the rules of diet as he practised the teachings of his religion. He was as uncompromising in the one case as he was in the other. An authenticated story is told of an argument which once took place between him and a sagacious man of the world on the question of vegetables as articles of diet. The mystagogue put forward as his reason for abstinence from animal food that one thereby distanced the animal; for the eating of beef encouraged the bovine quality, and the pork diet repeats the trick of Circe, the fabulous sorceress, and changes, at will, men into swine. But rejoined the sapient man of the world if absti-

ce from animal food leaves the animal out, does not the partaking of vegetable food put the vegetable in? I presume the potato diet will change man into a potato. And what if the potatoes be small? The Philosopher's reply to this is not recorded.

The first years of Mr. Alcott's manhood were devoted to educational purposes. The best days of his early life were spent in teaching small children. As a teacher he was an experiment—an exceedingly bold experiment. Those of you who take any interest in school matters, are doubtless familiar with Pestalozzi's method of imparting instruction to children of tender years. The Zurich philosopher, in his humble home,—for he sprang from the people—laid the foundation of a system which obtains largely in our day, in the Normal Schools of Europe and in many of the scholastic establishments of the United States. He treated everything in a concrete way. He originated object teaching. He taught the child to reason, and he introduced moral and religious training as a part of his plan. But the Swiss

teacher was too far advanced for his day. His school languished, and after it had involved him in financial ruin he was forced to give it up for want of means to carry it on. In America Mr. Alcott founded a school which boasted of similar principles. Strange as it may appear, he had never heard of Pestalozzi, nor did he know anything of his method. The idea had its original growth in his own mind. It formed itself in his brain as an original study of his own. He thought it all out, and it was some years after he had put the system in active and practical operation, that he heard of the Zurich model. Pestalozzi at that time was in his grave. Alcott opened his school in Boston. Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody, known to you, perhaps, as a zealous apostle of the Kindergarten system, Mrs. Nathaniel Hawthorne and other distinguished people took a deep interest in the proceedings. The school was held in the Masonic Temple. The room was tastily furnished and appointed. There were busts of Socrates, of Shakespeare, of Milton and of Scott, pieces of statuary representing Plato, and the image of Silence with out-stretched finger, and a cast in bas-relief of the Messiah. Several pictures and maps hung on the walls and the interior furnishing was of a class likely to interest and encourage the æsthetic taste of the smallest children. The scholars ranged in age from three to twelve years, and the progress they made in their studies can be considered nothing short of wonderful. The strictest discipline was enforced, and on certain aggravated occasions the teacher himself endured the punishment at the hands of those who transgressed the rules. Mr. Alcott insisted on the individual attention of his pupils and permitted no idle or careless moments. The replies to his questions were never given parrot-like. They were the result, always, of a liberal and conscientious exercise of the reasoning faculty. The children were taught to think for themselves, to reason and give their own impressions of a subject. Some of them scarcely four years of age, returned

answers to questions which would put to the blush many boys of sixteen or eighteen years old. The replies showed a most extraordinary familiarity with philosophical and literary and religious subjects. Nor were the ordinary branches as taught in public schools neglected, drawing, mathematics and the dead languages also received due attention, Miss Peabody's especial care being the Latin class. The children were not crammed, nor forced. Their progress was but the natural result of the peculiar system in operation. We can count on our fingers the precocious boys who could read books at four and five years of age and enjoy them, but these, you know, are the Johnsons, and Chattertons, and Macaulays and Whipples of history. Mr. Alcott had thirty children in his school who could not only read and understand such books as Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Krummacher's *Fables*, *Æsop's Fables*, Wordsworth's *Poems* and many others, but they could even criticise the thoughts and meanings of these authors with rare and judicious perspicacity. Let me give you an example. Reading one day Wordsworth's great ode—the Lakeside poet's masterpiece and the poem which will outlive all his other work, as Tennyson's *Idyls of the King* will survive his dramas and other poetry,—Mr. Alcott stopped at a verse and asked the little group before him what effect the rainbow, the moon and the waters on a starry night had on ourselves. "There are some minds," he went on, "which live in the world, and yet are insensible; which do not see any beauty in the rainbow, the moon, and the waters on a starry night." And he read the next stanza, that glorious burst that tells of the animation and beauty of spring, and pausing at every line he asked questions. "Why are the cataracts said to 'blow their trumpets?'" said he. A little girl replied, "because the waters dash against the rocks." The echoes thronging through the woods, led out to the recollections of the sound in the woods in spring; to echoes which they had severally

heard. "What a succession of beautiful pictures," exclaimed one very little girl rapturously. The pupils held their breath as Mr. Alcott read :

" But there's a tree, of many, one,
A single field which I have looked upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone :
The pansy at my feet
Doth the same tale repeat :
Whither is fled the visionary gleam ?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream ?"

When he ceased reading the verse, he waited a moment and then said, "was that a thought of life?" "No, a thought of death," said several.

"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting,"—

"How is that?" asked the teacher. After a pause, one of the more intelligent boys, eight years old, said he could not imagine. The two oldest girls said they understood it, but could not explain it in words. "Do you understand it?" said Mr. Alcott to a little boy of five, who was holding up his hand. "Yes, sir." "Well what does it mean?" "Why, you know," said the little fellow, very deliberately, "that for all that our life seems so long to us, it is a very short time to God." This was not an unusual occurrence. Every day the exercises were carried on in the same way, and the most interesting things were developed. Great latitude of expression was encouraged and pains were taken to make the pupils speak out without hesitancy or fear. Mr. Alcott made conscience a study. The general conscience of a school, he was often heard to declare, was the highest aim. The soul, when nearest infancy, was the purest, the noblest, the truest and the most moral. The very artlessness which children possessed led them to express their convictions, their strongest impressions. The moral judgments of the majority, urged the teacher, would be higher than their conduct, and the few whose conduct was more in proportion to their moral judgment, would

will keep their high place. The innocent, he sometimes punished alike with the guilty, justifying the correction administered, on the ground, that it tended to enlist the sentiment of honour and noble shame in the cause of circumspect conduct and good behavior.

The intellectual influences which were brought to bear were in nearly all cases and in all respects quite salutary. Investigation and self-analysis also formed part of the plan. Mr. Alcott read and told stories to the children, and related incidents which were calculated to arouse within them various moral emotions, enquiry and intellectual action. Journal-writing was another feature in the school which was prosecuted with good effect, and lessons in English composition were made very useful and entertaining. Of course, as in the case of Pestalozzi, there were many objections raised against Mr. Alcott's school. Some thought that one faculty was cultivated more than another, that the children were instructed far beyond their mental capacity, and that the body was weakened and the brain was hurried on to the very verge of destruction. It was averred that so much study would ultimately ruin the children and render them utterly unfit for the active duties of life. They would become mere intellectual monstrosities. But the teacher's faith in the soul and in his system remained firm. He began a series of conversations on the Gospels, and continued them for some time with surprising results. The newspapers, however, were dissatisfied, and a furious onslaught was made on the school in many of the leading journals of New England. It was attacked religiously, intellectually, medically, and I may add systematically. Boston was aroused to white heat, old time prejudices were shocked, and the narrow sectarian spirit openly rebelled against the teachings of the mystic philosopher. The school fell from forty pupils to ten, the receipts—the real back-bone of the institution—dropped from \$1,794 to \$343.

The blow fell soon after, and in April 1839 the furniture, library and apparatus were sold to pay the debts.

Miss Peabody—Mr. Alcott's assistant—has given in her volume, "The Record of a School," full details of the plan and scope of the teacher's system. It is dry reading, and portions of the diary are unutterably tedious, but for all that it is a good book to dip into now and then, and a very clear idea may be gathered from it regarding the school-master and his wonderful school. You can also read in more spirited language, perhaps, the romance of the Plumfield school, in Miss Alcott's "Little Men," the scenes of which were suggested by the Temple school. The copy is faithfully modelled on the original.

Harriet Martineau was startled at what she called Mr. Alcott's strange management of children, and in the third volume of her *Society in America*,—an affected and conceited book by the way, and one which you will hardly care to read,—she gives quite freely and dogmatically her opinion about it. On her return to England from America she spoke to Mr. Greaves—a follower and early friend of Pestalozzi;—about Mr. Alcott, and enlisted the attention at once of that gentleman, who wrote a long letter and actually meditated a visit to America for the sole purpose of seeing Alcott and learning his views. He even gave the name of "Alcott House" to the school which he had established near London, on the Pestalozzian principle. Mr. Greaves died, however, before he could carry into execution his intention of visiting the United States.

In 1837 Mr. Alcott was the father of Transcendentalism, the moving spirit, the guide, philosopher and friend of the movement. He regularly attended the meetings of the peripatetic club which met at the private houses of the members from 1836 to 1850, and always gave it his warmest support and sympathy. In speculative thought he was a leader. In spiritual philosophy he was an earnest teacher. He was never the critic that Ripley is, nor the

sser that Emerson is, nor had he the bright pictorial fancy of Curtis, nor the studiousness of Margaret Fuller, but he had great faith in, and loyalty to, the religion which was putting forth its buds and blossoms in every town and village of New England. He was stern and unyielding, and thoroughly saturated with his principles. Everything he did, he did with all his might, with all his soul. When Lloyd Garrison asked him to join the American Anti-Slavery Society, he held out his hand and said, "I am with you in that cause to the end." And he did remain faithful to the end, as long as the word *slave* had a meaning at all in the land. He sympathized heartily with the movement for the emancipation of women, and he was one of the Reformers of 1840 who met to discuss plans of universal reform.

His early life in Concord provoked a good deal of ill-natured ridicule and carping criticism, and even contempt in several rather influential quarters. He was regarded as a foolish visionary, an improvident fellow who allowed himself to be so carried away by fanciful dreams that he could do nothing but build castles in the air, and indulge from morning until night in what the Greeks called, the habit of empty happiness. For a while he supported himself during the summer months by tilling the soil, and in the winter time he chopped wood. But whether he planted or reaped in the garden and in the field, or felled giant trees in the resounding forest, his fancy still turned to thoughts of high endeavour, and his eloquent imagination pictured the airiest visions and the most lovely of all lovely things. His mind was full of quick-coming and beautiful creations, and like Wordsworth, like Bryant, like Thoreau, the friend of his youth, he listened to the songs which the brooks seemed to sing, to the lays which the birds chanted in his ear, and to the hymnal sounds and roundelays which echoed from the dark recesses of the wild woods he loved so dearly. He saw poetry in everything. To him nothing

was commonplace. He found truly, "tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones and good in everything."

It was at this time that he sent his series of papers to the *Dial*; the articles which bore the signature of "Orpheus." They were looked upon with suspicion, however, and his "Orphic sayings" became a by-word, and sometimes a reproach. Dr. Channing loved Orpheus at the plough, but he cared little for him in the *Dial*. But Orpheus as a man or as a writer, was the same in heart, in feeling and in principle. He was sincere through it all. He was honest in purpose and faithful in all things.

In 1843 he withdrew from civil society, and, like Henry Thoreau, four years later, he refused to pay his taxes, and was cast into jail. A friend interceded and paid them for him, and he was released, though the act gave him pain and annoyance. Shortly before this happened he went to England and became acquainted with a number of friends of "The First Philosophy." He was warmly and hospitably received, and his advent among the disciples of this faith was the signal for meetings for the discussion of social, religious, philosophical and other questions. The assemblies took place principally at the "Alcott House," and those of you who have traced out the progress of Transcendentalism in New England, will not be surprised to hear of the curious and motley collection of people who assembled to see and hear the Concord Mystic. There were Communists, Alists, Syncretic Associationists, Pestalozzians, Hydropathic and Philosophical teachers, followers of the Malthusian doctrine, Health Unionists, Philansteries and Liberals. Whether there were any Conservatives, pure and simple, or merely Liberal-Conservatives, present, I do not know. The record is silent on this point.

The proceedings, it is said, were exceedingly interesting, and the *Dial* at the time printed a copious abstract of what was done. Papers on Formation, Transition and Reforma-

tion—all of a most ultra stripe—were read and commented on. Mr. Alcott took scarcely any part in the discussion, but he was very much interested in what occurred and listened with marked attention to the opinions which were advanced. His sympathies remained unawakened, however, and the Radicals gained no new convert to their cause. He returned home shortly afterwards, and founded, with what success we already know, the little colony of Fruitlands.

In stature, Mr. Alcott is tall and stately. Though beyond his eightieth year, he is as straight as an arrow, and walks with a quick and firm step. Not a single faculty is dimmed, and his capacity for work, manual or mental, is as great as it was half a century and more ago. Regular in his habits and careful in the cultivation of dietetic principles, he seems destined yet to enjoy many years of usefulness. His head and face are an index to his character. His features are regularly drawn and full of expression, and a phrenologist would tell you that his Language is very large, his Brain is full, his Capacity is large, and his Mental Power scores seven on the chart. "A revered and beloved man," says Louise Chandler Moulton, "whose face is a benediction, whose silver hair is a crown of glory, and whose mild and persuasive voice never spoke one harsh or ungenerous word in all the many years he has spoken to his fellows." And Lowell, in that companion of *The Dunciad*,—"A Fable for Critics,"—says :—

"Yonder, calm as a cloud, Alcott stalks in a dream,
And fancies himself in thy groves, Academe.
With the Pantheon nigh and the olive trees o'er him,
And never a fact to perplex him or bore him.

For his highest conceit of a happiest state is
Where they'd live upon acorns and hear him talk gratis.

When he talks he is great, but goes out like a taper,
If you shut him up closely with pen, ink and paper;
Yet his fingers itch for 'em from morning till night,
And he thinks he does wrong if he don't always write;
In this, as in all things, a saint among men,
He goes sure to death when he goes to his pen."

This is a true portrait. The description is perfect. You can recognize at a glance the peripatetic philosopher, the visionary, the character you might expect to find, perhaps, in a romance, but never hope to meet in real life. And he lives in Concord, the very atmosphere of which tinged the life of Emerson, and coloured the weird fancies of Hawthorne, and poetized the nature of the Hermit of Walden, the odd genius of the place. What a galaxy of names! How proud the little town is of her one great novelist, her famous essayist, her naturalist whom she ranks next to Audubon, and her Mystic Teacher! It is worth while visiting Concord (go in the summer if you can) just to hear the people talk about the great men and women who once lived there, and of those who reside there still. You will be hurried along that dusty but historic road of theirs which was known in the dark days of the war, a hundred years ago, as the pathway along which the red-coated soldiers of His Britannic Majesty marched with their implements of death and destruction glistening in the bright sunshine. You will be told stories of '76 which have never been in print, but have been handed down along with old flint-lock muskets and rusty swords, from father to son for generations. You will be shown houses which can exist nowhere but in Concord. You will have pointed out to you the Concord library—an edifice whose spire and gothic build prompt you to ask if it is not a church—and your guide will smilingly tell you how many volumes it contains, and how often the Emerson, and Hawthorne, and Thoreau, and Alcott books have to be renewed, for your Concord citizen proper is a born philosopher, a poet who has not yet begun to write verses, and a true lover of the weird and mysterious in fiction. He even envies Salem in her boasted monopoly of the only true and original New England witch. If you are following your guide pretty attentively you will pause a moment or two before the large and comfortable-looking house of Emerson. This is the

house which was rebuilt, you remember, on the same plan as the old one which perished in the flames a few years ago. It has a good solid and substantial look about it, and you may be disposed to linger a while here, but you must press on, for presently you will come upon what you will be told is the delightful home of the Alcott's. This is certainly an historic house. It is more than a century and a half old. It is a mansion with a history, a house which would throw Mr. Wilkie Collins into ecstasies. What a quaint and grim old structure it is? Its tremendous beams are of solid oak, and the heavy wrought nails which hold them together were driven firmly home about the time that King George the Second ascended the throne of Britain. A famous old country house it is with its great rooms and spacious chambers, wide window seats, and ample fire-places and ghostly garret, and huge chimney-tops, and dearest and best of all, its lion-headed door-knocker—which never utters an uncertain sound or gives a wrong report. And look at its site and fairy-like surroundings! A rustic fence of gnarled trunks and boughs, every stick of which was cut and fashioned by the mystagogue himself—and proud indeed is he of his handiwork—encloses the manse and the elms which form a charming bower of velvet greenery in the summer, and a brave and stalwart defence from the cold and biting blasts in the winter. No one knows who planted these sentinel elms, but they were here in all their glory and loveliness long before the Rev. Peter Bulkeley arrived with his company of settlers from England in 1635. They overshadow the roof and the gables of the house, but they do not hide the grateful light which steals so softly into the hall and chambers. The view from the house takes in the whole country round. Broad meadows on one side, the Lincoln Woods on the south and east, the Willows by the Rock Bridge, Millbrook, the winding lane and the far-stretching hills beyond, and the ancient wood on the south-west are not a tithe of the rich and variegated scenery which meets the eye. And

what delightful surroundings! It is but a mile to Walden Pond, and to get to it you must pass through the lane opposite Wayside—Hawthorne's last residence—both spots justly dear to every admirer of the hermit and the romancer. You may penetrate the wood and read here on some sunny afternoon Thoreau's "Excursions," or "Walden," or "A week in Concord," or you may take up for an hour or two, "Septimius Felton," or "The Blithedale Romance," or you may turn, if you will, to Mr. Alcott's "Concord Days." You would enjoy such books in a place like this, with nothing to disturb you in the reading, with no sound save, perhaps, the twittering of the birds, with no living thing near you except, may be, a family of nimble Chipmonks watching you, curiously, from the branches of the trees.

When Mr. Alcott took possession of his house, some eighteen or twenty years ago, he was advised to pull it down and build it anew. But the carpenters, believing, probably, with Mr. Ruskin, that a house to be in its prime must be all of five hundred years old, told him it was good for a century more at the very least. So instead of tearing it down the owner set himself about to improve and beautify it. He prosecuted his æsthetic tastes to such an extent that Miss Louisa Alcott said that when her father had got through with his improvements even the tin-pans in the kitchen rested on gothic brackets. He did not modernize but retained all the old-fashioned characteristics of the place, everything was made to harmonize and serve some useful and pretty purpose. This house has, in its day, been the home of many distinguished persons, real persons and fictitious persons. Among the latter you will find the name of Robert Hagburn, the husband of Rose Garfield. The "Little Men" lived there too, for they are Mr. Alcott's grandchildren, and so did the Little Women, for they claim even a nearer relationship still.

Mr. Alcott's place is not on the platform, or in the pulpit. He is not a great writer. He is a very ordinary lecturer.

But he has made a name for himself in another sphere. He is a talker—a conversationalist of brilliant talents and parts. In this department of culture he is to-day, by all odds, the best living exponent. Coleridge, you remember, was unequalled in the art of graceful conversation, and the record is as full regarding his talks as it is of his books. De Quincey talked well, so did Margaret Fuller, so did Sheridan and so did Macaulay, who had, as Sydney Smith quaintly puts it, "occasional flashes of silence." But in our time we have very few eloquent talkers, if I may make exceptions of Holmes, and Aldrich, and Fields, and perhaps one or two others. I do not mean of course public speakers or orators, or parliamentary debaters, for of such lights we have very many notable examples. Mr. Alcott is not a platform celebrity. He would be as nervous on the lecture stage as Mr. Froude, and as unsatisfactory as Chas. Kingsley. And I think if he undertook to read you one of his own papers,—but no—the politeness and gallantry of a Quebec audience are proverbial. You would remain in your seats and hear him out. But Alcott, in the drawing-room or in the parlour, is quite another man. It is here that we have him at his best. It is here that you can perceive the wonderful breadth of his mind, and witness the splendid play of emotion in his sympathetic and earnest face, as he rolls out sentence after sentence of delicious and suggestive discourse. You are completely carried away, you listen as one entranced, you are enthralled with his subdued eloquence, for he is never noisy or declamatory. He talks on with the air of one who might be inspired—like a poet who cannot restrain the utterance of the fanciful things which struggle in his mind, like a romancer who in vain attempts to call back the escaping children of his brain. His tones are like the notes of the sweetest music you ever heard. You find yourself going over them softly to yourself. You seem to beat time, and as one mellow

strain, more delightful perhaps, than its fellows, floats through the air, you resign yourself in reckless abandon to the intoxicating impulse of the moment, and the calm and graceful soliloquy of the speaker still goes on. You take in his words and listen with amazement to the glowing, flowing diction, and the happy expression of idea, and you wonder at the fecundity of thought, and the charming variety and manner of the talk. Every winter Mr. Alcott takes the field and goes to the western and eastern cities of the United States, where his conversations are recognized and popular institutions. His audience is composed of cultured ladies and gentlemen, generally persons of kindred tastes and feelings. The meetings are held in a large room, and the guests are ranged round the speaker, who occupies a central and commanding position. When circumstances admit of it, the parlour is decorated in a manner which is calculated to lend an additional charm to the evening's entertainment. This is all very pleasant, and enhances quite considerably the interest of the occasion. Flowers, softened lights, pictures, pieces of statuary, a bit of bronze here and there, pretty carpets, and tasteful furniture add spirit and life to the performance, and gratify, always, the æsthetic in our nature. A topic of general interest is then started by Mr. Alcott, and his talk is framed in such a way that those who wish to take part in the conversation may exchange thoughts with the speaker. If none respond he goes on and talks for an hour or more. He instructs as he goes along. He creates enthusiasm in his theme. He delights, amuses and teaches his hearers. Sometimes his soul is so filled with ideal figures that he forgets he is not alone, and he talks on, elaborating and building and perfecting the thought which is uppermost in his mind. Pythagoras, Plato, Socrates, Swedenborg, Plotinus, Fludd, and curious old John Selden, whose bits of philosophic raillery delighted our forefathers two hundred and fifty years ago, comprise the famous group at whose feet Alcott loves to sit

and muse. His books are full of references to them and to their lives, and to their writings. His talk is rich in allusion to those literary masters of his, and to the influence they have had upon his mind; and in the shaping of his career. He is not a sermonizer, nor a preacher, but a talking philosopher, a modern mystic, a teacher of the ideal, the emotional and the moral element which is in man's nature. All unmindful of the world's progress, in a utilitarian sense, he chases the sunbeam still, and adheres to the old faith, to the doctrine of his early years. For some the glittering bauble has lost its charm, and the day of the Transcendentalist has waxed and waned, and finally passed away forever, but Alcott still looks beyond the veil, still seeks to know more of the unfathomable, still pursues his airy vision, still upholds the bright and shining star of his destiny. The mystery of life and death is yet unsolved. Is Transcendentalism only a mental weakness after all? Is it nothing, or is it but the frothy effervescence of a mind shattered by disease? Are we mocked by its beautiful phantoms? Does it lure us silently to destruction? Ought we to call it madness?